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TAGS: TBIO EAGR SOCI FR

SUBJECT: AVIAN FLU: FRANCE REACTS TO THREAT

REF: A)PARIS 5816 ; B)PARIS 6191

11. (SBU) Summary: The presence of the H5N1 virus in Romania, Turkey, and (possibly) Greece has captured front-page headlines and triggered much commentary in the French media. The French government reacted swiftly, too. Prime Minister de Villepin confirmed on October 14 the two French government priorities: to prevent the spread of the disease in birds, and to protect the health of the population, and he announced the implementation of new measures or reinforcement of measures already in place, particularly with regard to surveillance and reporting of bird deaths. Because winter migration patterns for wild birds that may be infected from the Urals region do not pass over continental France, French veterinarians are hopeful - at least this winter - that wild birds will not infect domestic poultry in France. A revised French government plan to fight avian flu is expected in the coming days. End summary.

"No reason to panic"

12. (U) On October 14, Prime Minister de Villepin convened ministers with responsibilities for avian flu preparedness, together with Professor Didier Houssin, the Inter-Ministerial Delegate for Avian Flu, to discuss risks related to the reports of the appearance of the H5N1 virus in Romania and Turkey. Contemporaneously, the GOF announced a number of measures concerning both the reinforcement of surveillance of wild and domestic fowl, and new preventive measures concerning human health. Finance Minister Thierry Breton noted that France had earmarked an additional 200 million euros from the 2005 budget to fund preventive measures. While the GOF sought to strike a reassuring note, Professor Houssin stated that his goal was to prepare France "as if the pandemic was to occur tomorrow."

13. The French National Plan to fight a "pandemic flu" on which experts started working five years ago was last revised in May 2005 (text, in French, available on the Health Ministry website: (http://www.sante.gouv.fr/htm/dossiers/grippe/pandemiegrrippale_plan.pdf). The GOF announced on October 14 that an updated version of the plan, taking into account the most recent scientific information available, will be released shortly.

Protect the population

14. (SBU) Sanitary Masks/Anti-Viral Medicine: France has stockpiled some 50 million masks, which have been distributed amongst French hospitals. Another 150 million will be available by 2006, and still another 200 million was ordered by the Health Ministry last week. The reported GOF goal is to eventually stockpile 600 million masks. Government health authorities claim to be in possession of between five to nine million anti-viral treatments (we've seen conflicting numbers), and have announced that 14 million more such treatments will be available by the end of 2005. GOF officials reportedly informed the press on October 17 that France has taken steps to cover the needs of 30 percent of its population, both in France and abroad. (Note: We have been told that the EU and the WHO recommend coverage for 25 percent of a country's population. End note.) In anticipation of the emergence of a Tamiflu-resistant virus, the GOF has also begun negotiations with GlaxoSmithKline to stockpile another anti-viral treatment, 'Relenza'. Health Minister Xavier Bertrand has said that the GOF will maintain the stockpile of anti-virals and distribute them -- under the strict supervision of the French army -- at no cost as needed

in case of a pandemic.

Preventing the spread of the disease

15. (U) Although it is still too early to determine exactly where France stands with regard to recently issued EU guidance concerning domestic poultry, France has announced a number of measures to ensure:
-- Increased surveillance of migratory birds;
-- Screening of domestic poultry for avian flu;
-- Encouraging farmers to keep poultry indoors to prevent contacts with migratory birds;
-- Stricter controls to prevent the introduction in France of already banned birds and bird products (feathers, etc.);
-- Improved reporting of suspect deaths by both farmers and people in contact with wild birds (hunters, people working in natural parks, environmentalists).

16. (U) Agriculture Minister Dominique Bussereau also announced on October 14 that a "realistic exercise" will take place in Brittany in early November based on the hypothetical discovery of a source of infection in the area. Applying the 'precautionary principle', France has also decided, with the European Commission, to immediately ban the import of poultry from Turkey or Romania.

17. (SBU) According to an Embassy contact at the Agriculture Ministry, World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) experts who recently analyzed migratory patterns of wild birds coming from the Urals region are of the opinion that the birds will head to the southern and western parts of Africa where they will winter, avoiding continental France entirely. However, anticipating possible avian flu outbreaks in Africa, Inter-ministerial Delegate for Avian Flu Houssin has emphasized the difficulties inherent in controlling the spread of the H5N1 virus if it appears there. He also has highlighted risks when potentially infected migratory birds return from Africa to Europe and urges the international community to help African countries counter the virus in Africa.

18. (U) Comment: Concern regarding the steady creep of the avian flu into southeastern Europe has created an incessant flow of commentary in the media. Paris' role as a major international transportation hub increases its vulnerability to any pandemic outbreak. The average Frenchman is not certain what s/he should do. The government is well into planning for a pandemic, while at the same time urging the public to remain calm. End comment.

STAPLETON